

## A-Narrativity in the Poetics of Marcel Duchamp

Bruce MALCOLM

### Introduction

If we examine readings of text-and-image through language poetry theory, we are faced with a difficult though self-evident choice: either accept these theories as narrative certainties and conclude that language is merely capable of deconstruction; or, as we must do in the case of Marcel Duchamp, go beyond the zone of determinacy in narrative. Readers must muddle through this dilemma as a characteristic theme of Duchamp's work: that Duchamp's language poetics of chance operation and indeterminacy is not based in any single theoretical practice, but in disciplinary motives that transcend any single context. Any number of historically valid theory-systems concerning the narrative self could be examined to explain his influences on the work of recent Language poets: Situationism, New Surrealist Discourse, Dada/Nihilism, and of course Deconstructionist theories.

However, if we examine the poetics of chance operation, we are in fact faced with a very different choice: to either forego analysis of the work's narrative (i.e. spatial and temporal) effects in favor of a cumulative "surface" reading; or to accept the surface of a work -- or in the case of Duchamp, multiple surfaces -- as de facto a-narrative processes. As we shall see, it is this latter, an ability to read poetic surface and its effects as a form of discourse, not unlike the "whole truth" vision that is produced by cinema vérité, that yields the most significant insights into the work of this most difficult of 20th century artists.

Both Lyotard and Paz promote the use of current Language Poetics theories as a means to attack the hegemony of the status quo over reality. This is, essentially, true, given that the subject, i.e., that which drives all narrative forces, is contextualised into a structural discourse that includes language as a whole, reading "meaning" into works that, in the example of Duchamp, have hitherto been obscured by the fact that they were labeled (or mis-labeled) either Surrealist -- that is, derivative of the subconscious -- or Dadaist -- derivative of "nothing," i.e., Nihilist. Both readings of Duchamp cannot be called merely incorrect due to their historical authenticity; but both now must be accompanied by a more synergistic, multi-disciplinary reading which takes into account forces ranging from a-narrativity and gender power exchanges to such meta-specific philosophies as Jung's analysis of synchronicity, and quantum theory as expressed in Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. (An examination of Duchamp's work in light of these last

two is the intended topic of the next paper in this series.) Needless to say, the leap required to view Duchamp's work in these parallel contexts should be composed of more than faith!

## A-Narrativity

In a sense, one of the main themes of the works of Duchamp is the difference between temporal discursivity and the consciousness which is locked into such a discourse. Upon examination of the texts that accompany *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, a number of appropriations and reductions concerning narrative may be found. From *Top Inscription*:

obtained with the draft pistons. (indicate the way to prepare these pistons).

Then "place" them for a certain time. (2 to 3 months) and let them leave their imprint as 3 nets through which pass the commands of the pendu femelle (commands having their alphabet and terms governed by the orientation of 3 nets [a sort of triple "cipher" thorough which the milky way guides and supports the said commands])

Next remove them so that nothing remains but their firm imprint i.e. the form permitting all combinations of letters sent across this said triple form, commands, orders, authorizations, etc. which must join the shots and the splash  
(*Writings*, p. 36)

And later in the same text:

3 Photos of a piece of white cloth-*piston of the draft*; i.e. cloth accepted and rejected by the draft.

(To avoid any play of light, make symmetrical marks, on the cloth flat before the photo in the form of points or small squares equal and at equal distances from each other [perhaps cut out]; after the photo, the group of marked squares disSymmetrically arranged, will present on a flat surface a conventional representation of the 3 *draft pistons*. (*Writings*, p. 99)

This is further accompanied by a series of diagrams explaining the relationship of these instructions to the work, *The Large Glass* of 1913, now located in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Often, Duchamp presents "instructive" discourses, such as the above, as parallel readings to a given work; they act as didactic indicators of states the artist wishes to invoke for his viewers/readers/consumers. They are not meant to explain, but to suggest *liminally*, through associations that weave elements of both text and object, a method of approach, an image-script primer for unraveling diurnal narrativity, where the absence of "understanding" leads, not to a negating of the constructs of the work, but to

an elimination of those constructs which the consumer of any given object-text brings a priori.

Thus, any number of theories concerning the defining characteristic of Duchamp's a-narrative force come into play. "Narrative continuity is intrinsically impossible," states Lyotard; but, according to Bailly, it is not so much that is intrinsically impossible, but rather that the determinants of narrative constructed by all genre yield a subsequent inevitable stasis; and in Duchamp's image-text volleys, a world of parallel contexts is opened beyond the borders delimited by a single genre. In a sense, Bailly uses the term 'detextualized narrative' to denote a mythopoetical whole, built, in the case of *The Large Glass*, by a commingling of text and image which is left continuously open and unresolved, in effect freeing the consumer from the standards of previous hierarchical baggage-contexts which he or she carries from experience to experience like an unburied corpse.

The subject-object division is quickly relegated to archeology in duchampian aesthetic. By frequently reducing the interactivity between a consumer and object to worthlessness and ridicule, Duchamp asserts the inefficiency of a subject-object relationship to explain the loss of necessity in images and text that began slowly with the end of modernism after the war and culminated in French postmoderns in the 1970s. Thus, Duchamp's reduction is interpolated into theories that include narrativity -- as well as the absence of a definable narrative -- as a totality. In *The Chocolate Grinder* (1912), Duchamp denies premodernist narrative; it is his final painterly image before the construction of *The Large Glass*, and as such it is simply an object that has gone beyond its intentions of consumability, its utilitarianism erased by the very lines that compose it.

The idea that this machine, and indeed all machines, act as interlocutors between their operator-subjects and product-objects is now seen as a self-falsifying paradox: once the object-image is observed stripped of its contextuality, the idea that a subject-actor will, or even can produce or act upon, and hence narrate, an object, (any object, let alone chocolate . . .) will immediately strike the reader as an incalculable absurdity once it is accepted that the machine, now enshrined as an image, bears no relationship to its utilitarian counterpart. Consumers are freed from the burden of having to create a narrative interplay between their experiential prejudices, and at the same time, of having an absolutist narrativity forced on them in terms of a preconceived subject-object discourse. This, as we shall see, is a method Duchamp employs to great effect in the discourse of sexual identity.

### Non-Specificity and Gendered Power Exchanges

Perhaps even more than in the realm of temporal subject-object negation, Duchamp promotes the use of a-narrativity to challenge the entrenched hegemony of outdated, sexist perceptions in society. In *RongRong* (1913), a seminal pastiche-text from the early New York Salon Period, he readily examines the constructivist paradigm of sexual

identities through the main character, Furlight, who is at times a man, at times a woman, and often neither, carrying the reader repeatedly to what, at the time of the text's publication, was considered a field of uncomfortable indeterminacy. In *Objet Dard*, the implications of mispronunciation underscore this: *dard* is a common French word for penis, and given Duchamp's propensity for punning, readers are implicitly given a set of linguistic keys by which they are expected to lock the gates of narrative continuity vis-à-vis standardized sexual identities. The truth inherent in *Objet* is only apparent once the reader realizes that the object and its accompanying poetic description is not that of a penis, but actually of modified and polished cast made of the internal workings of the feminine sexual mechanism. Even as early as this (1914) Duchamp was redefining the boundaries of both the permissible in art, and the what have now come to be considered the constructed genders of human biological identity.

"A pure state of sexual identity is fundamentally unattainable," says Brophy. Indeed. Examples of duchampian sexual a-narrativity abound and aver this statement, which could in fact be posited as the artist's central thematic device in the pivotal works created before the Second World War. With the submission of *Fountain* to the Exhibition of Independents in New York in 1915, and with it the subsequent commotion it activated, Duchamp's Ready-mades (hitherto benign objects such as the appropriated painting *Pharmacy* (1913) and the snow shovel entitled *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1914) -- both of which hark back to the banality and the decontextualization of *The Chocolate Grinder*) plumbed the depths of bad taste -- at least as far as the public was concerned. This urinal turned on its back and signed "R. Mutt" offended even the most open-minded of the judges, and was immediately rejected, though publicity of its existence insured notoriety. This of course delighted Duchamp, as did the accusations that his work was immoral, tasteless and patently worthless.

And yet *Fountain* carries with it some of the most interesting subtexts of all the Ready-mades, not the least of which are the those delineating a fluid interpretation of sexual identities. For while the urinal itself suggests the male, the fact that it is turned upside down immediately makes it useful to either sex (if indeed it is to be used for its intended purpose). Furthermore, the French translation of its name implies, as does the possible directional flow of a flush, feminine hygiene, the open cavity and the shape of the opening itself are openly reminiscent of the female sexual organs. Yet rather than the moral offense that *Fountain* engendered, critics would have done well to read it on a higher level of social operability. As an object, or a sculpture, or, as the title suggests, a point of romantic rendezvous, only an illiterate could read immorality into *Fountain's* simple porcelain lines; rather it is an amoral construct, in much the same way that the musical compositions of Cage, Berg, et. al., are atonal; when given informed listenings (or perhaps the purity of a raw uninitiated first-time listening) what is immediately obvious is the fact that these musics lie beyond the realm of tonality, indeed even beyond any context of tonal necessity. This of course segues nicely into my next topic: the amorality of Duchamp's creation of woman-as-alter-ego, Rrose Sélavy. The fact that Rrose Sélavy

resists specificity could explain why period critics referred to her consistently as “high-toned” and “immoral” -- as opposed to my conjecture that Rose Sélavy is beyond morality just as atonal music supersedes the confines of tonal strictures.

When dressed as Rose, Duchamp would present his hosts with a calling card that stated simply:

Précision Oculism  
RROSE SÉLAVY  
New York - Paris  
Complete Line of  
Whiskers and Kicks  
(*Writings*, p.104)

In addition to the serious side of Duchamp's business, there is as usual, a built in alternate and less serious, though subtextually rich possibility. “Oculiste” sounds like “au culiste” and it contains the word “cul,” ass. Duchamp's doctored and sexually ambiguous Mona Lisa was, of course, entitled *L.H.O.O.Q.*, which, when pronounced in French yields “elle a chaud au cul” or “she has a hot rear,” so Rose advertises herself a specialist in both precision ass and glass work.

Lyotard notes that “Sexual identity is part of the futility of reality.” Thus, considering that the textual paradigm of a-narrativity suggests that the significance of any one given reading depends solely on the preconceptions a reader carries as cultural baggage, we can assume that a lyotardian interpretation of the “poems” of Rose Sélavy would take into account a reader's individual continuum of resistance or acquiescence to the image of a pipe-smoking, impeccably dressed and admittedly successfully heterosexual continental like Duchamp suddenly appearing in bonnet, lace socks, slightly disheveled frock (suggesting a recent romp), and full make-up. Conditioned reactions at the time were, expectedly, rather pedestrian in their assumptions of Duchamp as crazy, as queer, as a hoaxter; certainly he may have been all of these and more, but not as defined by a public cultural aversion to these things; Rose Sélavy was, as noted by Baruchello, a willfully constructed “personality of mis-representation,” a re-definition of the boundaries of identity through sexual non-specificity.

## Out on a Limn

The premise of the fluidity within sexual identities is based on Duchamp's adaptation what Jasper Johns refers to as “branching and edging techniques” and what I will call liminal devices. These comprise any number of tactics Duchamp employed, ranging from the simple double entendre, packed with the confluence of (often sexual or absurdist) influences, to the a-narrative cinematography of his final tableaux *Given: 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas* (1967). It is to the latter work that we must turn for an explora-

tion of this liminality and its rejection of conventional narrative readings.

In *Given*, we are presented with, again, a scene and its accompanying text; inside the great Spanish doors, visible only through a voyeur's peep-hole, we witness a scene that on the surface implies that sexuality serves to exploit the underprivileged, but only if it is based on the premise of narrativity, i.e., that something happened previous to, and something will occur out of the given tableau. What problematizes the scene most is perhaps the complete lack contextual authority, negated and at the same time supported by its lack of a defining didactic text. Using sexual content to again provoke an intellectual response, Duchamp gives us the task of determining whether the woman depicted was just raped or whether she is beckoning the viewer to enter into a consensual sexual experience.

But the minute we choose one of these scenarios (or any other, afflicted as we are with our own baggage) we are confronted with the possibility of the other: the gas-lamp she holds aloft is at the same time a beckoning device and a cry for help. Indeterminacy underscores everything in this work: And once we realize that she is locked behind these doors we understand we can neither help her nor join her. By freezing what should have been a continuous narrative process into an indeterminate stasis of flux, without beginning or end, Duchamp has effectively portrayed the invalidity of narrative construction, leaving his consumers with a subdialectic, where, according to Adorno, each consumer's "sexual identity is part of the economy of the narrative" and yet unable to achieve the interactivity required of narrative continuity. In its absolute ambiguity this simple freeze-frame implies that we have to choose between an inability to complete the narrative in *Given*, with its praxis and subsequent collapse, and a personal sexual identity that brings into question the very reason we are standing at these doors, looking in on a scene that evokes pathos and horror at the same time it compels with its lush sensuality.

This dilemma is further complicated by the figure/ground distinction that emerges, and suggests that subject and object are indeterminate only as they are the baggage we bring with us in the absurdity of consciousness, which "branches and edges" us into an understanding that, beyond the paradox of a-narrative relationships inherent in any reading lies a self-supporting and self-negating text, for when we look through the doors of *Given* we are in all probability looking at none other than ourselves as we grind our way toward the next millennium, trying to fathom the great changes in seeing and reading that have been wrought by this most difficult-of-access, duplicitous, and pleasing of 20th century artists.

## References

- The Arensberg Collection*. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Art Museum, 1954.  
 Baruchello, Gianfranco and Martin, Henry: *Why Duchamp?* Kingston, New York, Macpherson and Company, 1985.  
 Brophy, G. Q. B.: *Dialectical Narrative in the Works of Marcel Duchamp*. Paris, Loompanics, 1976.

A-Narrativity in the Poetics of Marcel Duchamp

Johns, Jasper: *Duchamp, An Appreciation*. New York, Homogenous Press, 1971.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois: *Les Transformations Duchamp*. Paris, Galilee, 1977.

Paz, Octavio: *Marcel Duchamp or the Castle of Purity*. London, Cape Goliard; New York, Grossman, 1970.

Sanouillet, Michel and Peterson, Elmer, editors: *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. New York, Da Capo Press, 1973.